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Bush's budget could hurt Vt., delegation says

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WASHINGTON -- President Bush's proposed 2007 budget would hurt Vermonters by slashing funds for drug enforcement, affordable housing, farm aid and Lake Champlain cleanup.

Bush says the cuts to programs ranging from Medicare to college loans are needed to reduce the huge federal deficit, which is estimated at \$423 billion for the 2006 fiscal year. The deficit threatens the economic strength of the nation, Bush said.

Bush is proposing a total of \$14 billion in cuts in about 140 discretionary programs. At the same time, he is seeking to boost spending for defense and homeland security. However, he would eliminate a funding formula that has helped give Vermont and other small states a guaranteed share of homeland security money.

Congress has the power to reject the president's suggestions and has blocked many of his efforts to cut popular programs in the past.

Vermont's delegation said Bush should not be targeting programs that benefit average Americans while continuing to offer tax cuts to the wealthy.

"The president's budget is a mismatch for the real priorities of ordinary Vermonters," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt.

Leahy, and Sen. Jim Jeffords and Rep. Bernie Sanders, both independents, vowed to fight the cuts, which Sanders estimated at \$20 million.

Among the Vermont people and places that would be affected, according to an analysis by the delegation:

Lake Champlain: The president's proposal would cut the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which helps farmers keep water polluted with fertilizer and animal waste from flowing into Lake Champlain. It also would cut the federal clean water program that helps states build wastewater treatment plants, control runoff from city streets and restore watersheds.

City of Burlington: Vermont's biggest city would lose nearly \$1 million a year in federal funds under a proposal to eliminate Community Development Block Grants. The city uses the money for economic development and affordable housing. The rest of Vermont would lose more than \$7 million if the grants disappear.

Low-income seniors: Bush would eliminate funding for the Commodity Supplemental Food Program, which provides food to low-income senior citizens for less than \$20 a month. More than 4,200 Vermonters use the program. Bush also is seeking a \$36 billion cut in Medicare and a 70 percent cut in rural health programs.

Farmers: Bush would impose a new tax on dairy farmers of 3 cents per hundredweight of milk

produced. The tax would work out to be about \$6 per milk-producing cow per year, said Chris Galen of the National Milk Producers Federation. Also, the federal dairy subsidy, known as MILC, would be cut by 5 percent. Bush also proposes cutting in half funding for the Farmland Protection Program, which helps farm owners protect their property from development.

Police: Bush would cut about \$23 million from the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program, which has helped pay for Vermont's Drug Task Force. The task force combats the growing problem of heroin addiction and trafficking in the state. It also cuts a program that has helped keep the nation's growing methamphetamine problem from infiltrating Vermont from places such as upstate New York.

Poor children: Cuts in funding for education programs for poor kids would end special math and reading programs for 9,400 Vermont children. Also, Bush proposes to cut almost \$25 million nationwide for the Boys and Girls Clubs of America, which work to keep children away from drugs and gangs. Twenty clubs throughout Vermont serve more than 10,000 children.

College students: Bush's 2007 budget proposal calls for the elimination of Perkins loans, which help students from working-class families pay for college by lending them up to \$4,000 a year for undergraduate study or \$6,000 a year for graduate study. It also would freeze Pell grants at \$4,050 for the fifth year in a row despite rising tuition costs. Those grants help low- and moderate-income students.

Homeland security: Bush would eliminate the small-state minimum that Leahy previously won to ensure that Vermont received a guaranteed amount of homeland security funds. From 2002 until the end of this year, Vermont will have received \$61 million in grants for first-responders. Bush's budget puts future funds for the state in jeopardy, Leahy said. Lawmakers worry that Vermont's proximity to the Canadian border makes it vulnerable to terrorists seeking to sneak into the country.